

The Voice of the Dragon:
The emerging media in the new democracy of Bhutan

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Statement

I hereby certify that the work included in this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. The sources of information used and the extent to which the work of others has been utilised, have been indicated throughout the thesis.

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Abstract

In 2008/9 I spent a year working in Bhutan, a tiny landlocked country in the Himalayas, mostly known for its mystical tantric Buddhism and philosophy of Gross National Happiness. In the past two decades, this isolated feudal monarchy has transformed into a modern, digitally connected democracy with a vibrant growing media space.

For centuries Bhutan had been closed to outsiders and had developed as a predominantly oral culture. But in 1999 it cautiously opened itself up to the outside world, allowing television and the Internet. In 2003 mobile phones arrived then, in 2006, the king announced the country would become a democracy. To prepare the people he granted licences for new radio stations and two independent newspapers. The king's vision for democracy required a vibrant independent media where citizens could express their views, engage in public discourse and hold their elected leaders to account. Since then more newspapers and radio stations have launched. The Internet has brought news blogs and Facebook.

The Dragon Finds Its Voice is a personal account of my experience working with independent newspaper the *Bhutan Observer* and the challenges it faced. This narrative provides a personal and cultural context for the accompanying exegesis. In the exegesis I employ both western media theorists (such as Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Benedict Anderson, Arjun Appadurai and Denis McQuail) and the work of Bhutanese scholars (including Kinley Dorji, Siok-San Pek and Karma Phuntsho) to analyse the unfolding media landscape. While the developed world grapples with the changes brought by media convergence and the collapse of old economic models, Bhutan's unique experience is instructive as it confronts the challenges of the modern interconnected world in an intellectually and spiritually robust way. It provides a fresh place from which to (re)think established notions of media and its efficacies and different ways to appreciate the connections enabled by media across time and space.